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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000528

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BO

SUBJECT: THE BELARUSIAN PARTY OF FREEDOM: AN ACTIVE PLAYER
OR PARTY ON THE FRINGES?

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 16, Poloffs met with the leader of the unregistered Belarusian Party of Freedom (BPF) Sergey Visotsky at the latter's request to discuss his party's activities. The BPF first appeared in 1993 as a student initiative and, according to Visotsky, remains a youth organization dedicated to removing Lukashenko. He claimed the BPF was part of the "Khlopits" (Enough) civil-society campaign and supported the opposition movement during the March presidential elections, resulting in 23 BPF members being arrested. Visotsky criticized the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Vilnius for playing favorites when allocating funds and accused opposition members of withholding money from the BPF. Although an interesting meeting, Visotsky's BPF seems to be a lone party on the peripheries of the opposition movement. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Leader of the unregistered Belarusian Party of Freedom (BPF) Sergey Visotsky on May 16 explained his party's position in the opposition movement. According to Visotsky, the BPF is a conservative youth party of 150 active members, 50 of which reside in Minsk. The BPF started as a student initiative in 1993 and its goal is to seek democratic change in Belarus and the removal of Lukashenko. The BPF has chapters in Gomel, Soligorsk, and Mogilev and close ties with the Ukrainian People's Party and the Belarusian National Center in Ukraine.

BPF and the Opposition

¶3. (C) Visotsky claimed his party and Malady Front (when under Pavel Severinets' control) were once active partners and that the Ten Plus Coalition's preferred youth group, Right Alliance, is an offshoot of the BPF. During the March 19 elections, 23 BPF activists were arrested on October Square and at least one was later expelled from his university. The BPF supported the opposition movement during the elections, but not one particular leader, and would be willing to coordinate more with both former presidential candidates Aleksandr Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin.

¶4. (C) Although he claimed the BPF was an active member of the opposition movement, the party has gotten the cold shoulder from its brothers-in-arms. According to Visotsky, the BPF and Severinets originally created the NDI-funded "Khlopits" (Enough) civil-society movement. However, when the time came, Borisov youth activist Sergei Salash and Belarusian Popular Front deputy Ales Mikhalevich did not allocate to BPF the necessary funding from the American NGO the International Republican Institute (IRI). Visotsky reported the problem to Milinkevich, but the BPF still did not receive its money, and therefore left the Khlopits

campaign.

BPF Lambastes NDI

¶5. (C) Visotsky criticized IRI in Vilnius for leaving his party without any material or financial support because it viewed the BPF as an insignificant party that "was not doing enough." According to Visotsky, his party was not even invited to the October 2005 Congress of Democratic Forces. Visotsky said he was tired of foreign conferences and seminars where nothing was accomplished and seeing financial support given to the same group of "opposition" activists who lie about their membership and activities. He told Poloffs that it was demoralizing to have funding withheld when he knew it existed.

¶6. (C) Visotsky said his party was dying because it financially could not support itself. BPF's headquarters is a poor apartment on the outskirts of town and the party cannot afford to carry out its political activities. He said his party plans to solicit money from Belarusian/Ukrainian businesses in Kiev, but he was not sure if this would help. Pitching for U.S. support, Visotsky said the BPF had the potential to grow if it had computers and the proper material support.

Ongoing Battles

¶7. (C) Visotsky thanked the U.S. for the moral support it provided BPF during its continuous battle to preserve the NKVD massacre site Kurapaty from GOB-initiated development. He claimed it was his party that camped at Kurapaty in

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2001-2002 to protest GOB plans to build Minsk's ring road through the site. BPF's second battle is to prevent the growth of the Russian-based neo-nazi party RNE. Although he did not explain how the BPF was fighting the RNE movement, he claimed RNE's presence in Belarus in the last year had increased and had "serious capital" supporting it.

Visotsky's Time In Parliament

¶8. (C) Visotsky explained he was the youngest member of Minsk's City Council in 1995 and received twice as many votes as the next leading contender. In 1996 he became the youngest MP in the Upper House of Parliament, again with a large percentage of the votes in his district. However, following Lukashenko's 1996 referendum that gave him sweeping constitutional powers, Visotsky and other anti-Lukashenko activists lost their seats.

Comment

¶9. (C) It was obvious that Visotsky's purpose for meeting with Poloffs was to solicit financial and material support. In 2004, Poloffs met with Visotsky and concluded that his party, although anti-Lukashenko, contributed little to the opposition movement. In this meeting, Visotsky admitted that he and members of his party were conservatives, not liberals (in the American sense of the word), and opined that this may be the reason for the BPF's unpopularity among the Western European donors. Although he argued that his party was active in the anti-Lukashenko election campaign, he failed to convince us that the BPF was no more than a loner on the fringes of the opposition movement.

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